

Too Much Tolerance

ALLAN BLOOM

NPQ: Let's look at feminism and the family. Don't you imply in your book that feminism is largely at fault for the high divorce rate because it encourages women to place their personhood above family duty?

Bloom: Not at all. I don't say feminism is the cause; I say radical individualism is the cause. I discuss the family from the point of view of the preparation of students for a liberal education.

So many kids today come from homes where the parents are divorced. The psychological effects of divorce affect the university atmosphere. There were times and places in history where the attachment to the ancestral was so great that there was no freedom for reason. Now, the situation is reversed. As a result of broken homes, there is such a quest for roots, for settling down and finding trust—there is so much insecurity—that opening students' minds to free inquiry about the nature of things is barely possible. Free inquiry is too dangerous, too unsettling.

I argue that radical egalitarianism and cultural relativism encourage the separation of individuals. As a result, kids today have no really profound connections with the world and with one another. The nuclear family is an issue because it is the only restraint against our society's moving toward what I call "social solitaires."

I wrote about women in my book with considerable care. There is no suggestion on my part about turning back the clock in any way. But there should be no illusion that liberated choices have no price. There are damages.

Who naturally cares for a child? His parents. If the parents find that out of economic necessity they can't devote attention to childrearing, others have to take their place. The fad of hysterical concern about child abuse is one aspect of the change. It comes out of the problem that so many children are taken care of by somebody else who doesn't have the motives of the parent. Parents feel guilty and frightened by their loss of supervision and therefore try desperately to make certain that those to whom they entrust their children will be reliable. But nothing can take the place of parents' motives.

NPQ: Do you think these parental problems are a matter of choice or economic necessity? It takes two wage-earners today to make ends meet.

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Bloom: I think Americans have much more choice than they say. If they're fully conscious of the problem, men and women can make different kinds of arrangements.

The problem is deeper, though. One of the worst tendencies in America is that individuals place the highest priority on the right to "feel good about myself." That kind of "rights morality" easily becomes a cover for self-indulgence and neglect of one's duties.

NPQ: In discussing sexual liberation you seem to imply a natural order to the family that is valid across all time. You say that "Sex may be treated as a pleasure out of which men and women make what they will . . . its importance or unimportance in life is decided freely by individuals. Or, sex can be immediately constitutive of a whole law of life, to which self-interest is subordinated and in which love, marriage and child-rearing of infants is the most important business. It cannot be both."

To take one example, doesn't the technology of the birth control pill change all that? Now pleasurable sex without procreation needn't undermine the family structure.

Bloom: The pill makes it easier not to have kids, but it increases the possibility of promiscuous sex. What are the psychological effects of that? Technology does not change nature. It makes promiscuous sex safer, but it does not provide a substitute for the attachment formed by sexual fidelity. Sex is made less sacred, and the singularly deep attachment to the family, bonded by sexual pleasure, is weakened. Part of today's unattachedness comes from easy, intimate contact which, strangely, makes it harder to have profound contact. This is as true for men as for women.

Rousseau, who in my view was the real founder of the idea of sublimation, argued that the effect of eroticism was to give us the possibility of idealism and attachment. Promiscuous sex undermines eroticism by replacing its mystery with immediate gratification.

And if sexual pleasure isn't mixed with enduring relationships—"this is the only person I want to do it with"—it becomes something like what herd animals do.

I've found it much harder to teach Plato's *Symposium* recently because in the *Symposium* you're asked to justify your erotic attachments, to say what they mean about life. The beginning and the end of what most kids have to say about sex today is "I have the right to do what I want in the privacy of my own bedroom." Well, okay, but that doesn't take you very far.

Just as our age is not a good one for nuns, it is also not very good for romantic kids. I am convinced that if you don't have the language for something you pretty much end up not having it any longer. This is what is happening with the multifarious phenomena of love.

NPQ: Some women criticize you as a "speculative anti-feminist" who has no idea of the concrete realities of women's lives today.

"Women just won't fit back into the girdle," as Betty Friedan says.

Bloom: . . . Feminists have attacked me as saying that the liberation of women is not natural. That's not what I said in *The Closing of the American Mind*.

What I explicitly said was that America has two great traditions: love of nature and love of the conquest of nature. Feminism is especially related to the latter. It is very American in its love of the conquest of nature. The pill is an example of conquest over a nature which tied women to the family and dependence on males. What is difficult is to respect nature and at the same time have the passionate desire to conquer it.

So, I see the liberation of women as part and parcel of the American tradition. It's the specific ideology of contemporary feminism—of abstract equality and the notion of a very specific female essence unrelated to the male essence that I find problematic.

NPO: Why is the "feminist ideology" problematic for the university?

Bloom: The abstract ideology of feminism is one of the great threats to the university because its partisans argue that all literature antecedent to the feminist movement is sexist, from Plato to the Bible to Huck Finn. If all literature is sexist, then of course, it can't be taken seriously. Sexism has become the absolute evil.

You hear kids today saying, "Well, you know Aristotle had this weakness of not taking women into account"—already knowing it all and judging it unworthy before knowing anything! Aristotle's very definition of a barbarian is one who treats a woman like a slave. Nature is his standard, and it was the first standard which grounded equal treatment of women. I have yet to see a better one.

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NPQ: What about rock music? You dismiss rock n' roll as "junk food for the soul" which gives vent to the unmediated, barbarous expression of the "rawest passions" and against which there is no intellectual resistance. You say it may well be that a society's greatest madness appears as normal to itself, and that rock offers "nothing noble, sublime, profound, delicate, tasteful or decent. It is only intense, changing, crude and immediate"—confirming Tocqueville's fears about the baseness of democratic art.

Bloom: I've simply pointed out how terribly important rock music is to the lives of kids today.

I think the chapter on rock music is one of the best interpretations of the passages on music in Plato, which argues that music expresses the dark, chaotic forces of the soul and that the kind of music on which people are raised determines the balance of their souls.

The influence of rock music on kids today reasserts a central role of music that had fallen into disuse for almost a hundred years. Once we recognize this new centrality, however, we have to discuss which passions are aroused, how they are expressed, and the role this plays in the life of society. That kind of critique has never taken place.

NPQ: In general, you avoid blaming consumer capitalism as a major force in the "degradation" of culture, especially concerning rock n' roll.

You also suggest that rock musicians release the dark forces in the soul without taming them through form and beauty as did Bach or Beethoven. Frank Zappa argues that the problem is not in the musicians, but in the middle-aged recording executives who are pandering to the base tastes of the public in order to boost sales.

Bloom: I do say that the spread of rock music is a result of the mixture of infantile taste and business exploitation of it. I didn't say for a moment that consumer society isn't a problem; it brings with it a huge amount of vulgarity. The nature of consumer society is to exploit the passions. But rock music is particularly crafted to suit its targets.

However, I'm not an economic determinist. A Marxist description is obviously very powerful, but it is a cheap criticism which avoids taking responsibility for one's own life. Parents, after all, can still influence kids' taste. They should not be deprived of the right to direct their children's education. The

ubiquity of rock n' roll exposes the poverty of the home. There is a hidden message in rock that young people grasp immediately: they have inviolable rights to the expression of their uneducated sentiments. The electronic devices, the hi-fi and TV, are a common highway passing through all the houses in America, and there is no resistance to it. Privacy, which means the possibility of having a different life from what is most popular, disappears.